

# The Ramayana

The epic poem, *Ramayana*, tells the story of the life of Rama, Prince of Ayodya. Rama is the seventh incarnation of Vishnu. This story, combined with the Mahabharata, represents the most celebrated tale in all of Hinduism. In fact, Hindus are often named after the colorful and profound characters of these epics. It is also common to see these deities worshiped in temples and during festivals.

Here is a brief retelling of the cycle of *Ramayana*.

Our story begins in the city of Ayodya, capital of the land of Koshal, to the north of Benares, between the River Ganges and the Himalayas. Here lived Prince Rama and his younger half-brother, Lakshmana. Their father was King Dasharatha, ruler of Ayodya. Rama's mother was Kaushalya.

The brothers grew up happily, excelling in sports while mastering weaponry and horsemanship. But their real adventures began when the famous sage, Vishwamitra, asked for Rama's help in slaying a stronghold of *rakshasas*, forest demons. These demons plagued the forest-dwelling ascetics, ruining their fire sacrifices and defiling their altars. Although only teenagers, the boys accompanied the sage into the depths of the woodlands.

Soon, the brothers had won the hearts of their people by destroying demon after demon. Despite the evil spirits' powers of invisibility and great strength, Rama's arrows pierced them all, even the most terrible.

They returned with the sage to the city of Mithila, where the famous bow of Shiva was kept under the rule of King Janaka. The brothers were anxious to see the bow which no one—not king or sage—could string. Impressed by the brothers' heroism, King Janaka announced that if Rama could string Lord Shiva's bow, then the young prince would marry his daughter, Sita.

Effortlessly, Rama lifted the mighty bow. And as he strung it, it broke in two with a thunderous sound.

Rama and Sita were married. Lakshmana and Sita's sister, Urmila, were also wed. When the couples returned to Ayodya, a festive welcome awaited them. There they lived happily for the next twelve years.

When the aging King Dasharatha had to name a successor, he chose Rama, his eldest son. Throughout the land the inhabitants celebrated, knowing that the Prince would be a wise and brave leader. What they did not know, however, was that a crisis was about to befall Ayodya.

The trouble began when Kaikeyi, Dasharatha's third wife and mother of Bharata, heard the news that Rama was to be crowned. She was overjoyed, feeling as if Rama were her own son. However, her maid, Manthara, had evil intentions. She worked relentlessly to convince Kaikeyi that Rama would have Bharata sentenced to death, even though Bharata was away in his grandfather's kingdom.

Now, years back, Kaikeyi had saved King Dasharatha's life. He had promised her any two things she wished, and she had saved these boons. Now she demanded that Bharata be made king and that Rama be exiled to the forest for fourteen years. The King, deeply distressed, tried to go back on his word, but Rama would not let him. Instead, he nobly agreed to Kaikeyi's terms, announcing that the most virtuous act was to keep his father's word.

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Hearing this, Sita said she would join her husband. The dangers of the forest, she proclaimed, would be nothing compared to living without her husband. The loyalty of Lakshmana also compelled him to join his brother. So, without malice or regret, Rama clothed himself in the robe of an ascetic, blessed the throne for Bharata, and left for the forest with Sita and Lakshmana.

Deep into the forest traveled the three companions. But it was not long before they received a visitor, Bharata himself.

Having learned of Rama's exile, Bharata came to his brother in distress, asking Rama to return to Ayodya and assume his role as king. But again Rama stood firm: it was most important that their father's pledge to Kaikeyi remain unbroken. He would remain in exile. Bharata understood, proclaiming that he would rule on Rama's behalf. As a symbol of his elder brother's true authority, Bharata placed Rama's sandals on the throne.

After Bharata departed, Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana found a peaceful spot by a river. There they built a cottage. Living in harmony, the trio was esteemed by the sages of the forest. These ascetics were also thankful for the protection which Rama provided. Since his arrival, many Rakshasas were slain.

As news of Rama's might spread, the demons became angrier. In fury, they gathered an army of fourteen thousand and attacked, swearing to defeat their nemesis. At once, Rama ordered Lakshmana and Sita to take refuge in a nearby cave. Then, single-handedly, he defeated the massive demon army. However, the evil Akampana escaped Rama's arrow and flew in his carriage back to his ruler, Ravana. King of the Rakshasas, the demon Ravana had ten heads and twenty arms, standing giant and powerful.

Learning that Rama had slain his two brothers and thousands of other demons, Ravana swore vengeance. Aware of Rama's physical prowess, he plotted the kidnaping of Sita, for without his beloved wife, his source of love and devotion, the Prince would surely die of a broken heart.

And so it was that Ravana, disguised as an ascetic, arrived at the forest home of the royal family. There he managed to lure Rama away in pursuit of a demon appearing as a beautiful deer. As the deer led Rama deeper into the woods, Sita worried and pleaded with Lakshmana to find her husband. It was then that Ravana appeared at the cottage.

Although she did not recognize Ravana, Sita sensed danger. At once, Ravana assumed his true form and abducted Sita. As they flew southward to the land of Lanka, he promised her riches and power if she would be his queen. Sita scoffed at his offer, warning that he would be destroyed by Rama.

Meanwhile, Rama and Lakshmana despaired. After discovering the deer's true identity, they returned to find Sita missing. Rama plunged into sorrow, vowing to destroy the world unless the gods restored Sita to his side. Just then, Jatayu, an aged vulture loyal to King Dasharatha, spoke to the brothers. Wounded and breathing his last breaths, the faithful bird had tried but failed to rescue Sita. Now the vulture told Rama that his wife was not dead, but kidnaped by Ravana. As the brothers buried Jatayu, they vowed to rescue Sita.

## **The Ramayana** *(cont.)*

Knowing they would need help, Rama and Lakshmana sought out the well-known monkey, Hanuman. A strong bond grew between them, and soon Hanuman had gathered together an army of monkeys, promising to liberate Sita. Indeed, they already had some jewelry the Princess had dropped from Ravana's carriage. The legion searched and searched in all directions until they learned that Sita had been carried to the land of Lanka, in the southern ocean.

Although the monkeys were powerful animals, able to leap great distances, the vast stretch of ocean between the lands was disheartening. Only the mighty Hanuman, son of the wind god, possessed the divine energy to jump the great waters. They watched as Hanuman changed into a huge form and soared above the ocean at great speed.

When Hanuman finally reached Lanka, he leapt the city walls and began to search for Sita. He sneaked through the palace, but nowhere could he find the Princess. Finally, wandering the night, he found the captive Sita in a grove of trees. There he witnessed as Ravana tried in vain to lure Sita into marriage. But she would not budge, speaking only of her loyalty to Rama. At last, the demon king threatened to have her killed unless she consented.

When Sita was alone, Hanuman lowered himself from the trees. He gave her one of Rama's rings and offered to carry her home on his back. But Sita refused. She would be rescued, she declared, only by her husband who would destroy Ravana and restore her honor. Nothing short of this would she accept. Handing Hanuman a jewel, she bid the brave messenger return to Rama and deliver it to him.

And so Hanuman crossed the ocean once again to deliver the news of Sita's safety. Rama's heart swelled when he saw the jewel Sita had sent. And when he learned that she would be rescued by him alone, he felt heavenly pride.

Now, led by Rama and Lakshmana, the monkey troops gathered again on the shores of the sea. Suddenly, they saw a group of rakshasas flying toward them. Braced for attack, they were surprised to find that it was Ravana's younger brother, Vibheeshv, come to seek refuge with them, for he would not take part in Ravana's evil scheme.

The newcomers were welcomed by the monkeys, who still faced a serious problem: how were they to cross the sea? They could not find a solution until Rama threatened to dry the waters himself if the ocean gods did not help. But as the enraged Prince lifted his bow, the Lord of the Ocean, Sagara, rose before him. Sagara instructed the army to build a bridge which his powers would support.

The monkeys worked furiously until the bridge was built and they crossed safely to Lanka. Ravana, witnessing their passage, gathered his soldiers for war, vowing to destroy Rama. Thus, the battle began.

All day, the demons and monkeys fought to a standstill. Slowly, though, the monkeys proved mightier. Seeing this, Ravana himself appeared on the battlefield, showering arrows upon his enemies. Rama acted at once, destroying Ravana's chariot, leaving the king defenseless before him. But in his honor Rama would not kill an unarmed enemy, and Ravana retreated, ashamed, to his palace.



# The Ramayana *(cont.)*

It was not long, however, before the demon King returned fully armed for war. Now he raged and took deadly aim at Lakshmana. Ravana's arrow pierced the young man's heart. Rama, stricken with grief, lay by his dying brother's side. But a voice consoled him. The wise monkey, Sushena, knew of an herb from the distant mountain, Mahodaya. This herb would heal Lakshmana's wounds.

At once, Hanuman flew to the Himalayas. But when he reached the mountain, he did not know which herb to bring. So he gathered his strength and lifted the entire mountain back to Lanka! The monkeys watched in awe as Hanuman delivered the mountain. They found the correct herb and celebrated as Lakshmana was healed.

Just then, a war cry rent the air. Aboard a new chariot, Ravana attacked. Rama mounted his chariot and charged. The Prince of Ayodya and the king of the rakshasas battled fiercely. For a long time, the clanging of steel was all that was heard. Finally, Rama, invoking help from the gods, fired an arrow into Ravana's heart. The demon fell dead.

Lanka was captured and Sita set free. But as Rama approached her, he looked forlorn. He told Sita that they must part, that a husband cannot take back a wife who has lived in another man's house. But Sita had thought only of Rama during her captivity. How, she wondered tearfully, could he doubt her purity?

Boldly, she proclaimed that she would prove her purity. Sita ordered the monkeys to build a funeral pyre. When the wood was piled and set aflame, she walked three times around the pyre. Proudly, she bid farewell to the world and leapt into the fire.

But no harm came to Queen of Ayodya. Agni, the fire god, appeared before her and, leading her safely out of the flames, announced to Rama that she was indeed virtuous.

Rama, deeply moved, accepted his Queen. Indeed, in truth he had never doubted her. If they were to rule the people of Ayodya, he knew, all suspicion must be removed.

Together, the royal pair returned to their kingdom, where they ruled for many years. Virtuous and wise, they brought order and happiness to the people of Ayodya and beyond.

